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The Losses of the French Universities during the War

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THE LOSSES OF THE FRENCH UNIVERSITIES DURING THE WAR

Before I address myself to the grave subject upon which I have been asked to speak to you, permit me to tell you with what joy, with what emotion, and with what pride I appear before you: joy because the enthusiasm with which you have come to Des Moines, the spirit of consecration with which you are fired, open radiant vistas before the eye of Christian hope; emotion because on the occasion of my last meeting with American students a Frenchman spoke to you about my country—and with what prophetic insight, what sincerity, what hope! That was at Lake Mohonk, at the Conference of the World's Student Christian Federation the year before the war. Charles Grauss, the speaker of that occasion, my predecessor as General Secretary of the French Students' Christian Federation, has since laid down his life for France and the cause of justice. I cannot refrain from doing homage to his memory, as I recall his ardor in calling up before you the true image of our fatherland and the touching applause you accorded him. And lastly, I am proud—pardon me if I announce the fact somewhat naively, for I assure you that I speak most sincerely and without the least trace of chauvinism—I am very proud to speak to you of the war-time France, and of the after-the-war France, bruised, bleeding, perplexed, and troubled, but none the less admirable,—and of that small portion of France which is supremely dear to me, the French Christian Student Movement, to which many others are with me devoting all their soul and all their strength; a Movement which is weak indeed beside yours and of small numbers, but which nevertheless has its place among our young people and of which it is our highest ambition to make an intelligent and mighty force for the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ.

The qualities which France revealed during the war, the sufferings she endured with unalterable patience and simple dignity, many among you know. Certainly we Frenchmen shall not forget all the young men of Canada and the United States who came to our shores, defended with us the soil of our fatherland, and mingled their blood with ours, and we shall treasure especially the memory of those whom the great fraternity of death has united indissolubly with the sons of France. The majority of you, I am assured, have learned to know us and to love us. Permit me, however, to remind you of the gravity, the importance, the solemnity of my country's sacrifice. It was not a small portion of France, it was the entire country which found itself from the very beginning engaged in this great struggle. All physically fit men from twenty to forty-eight years of age were immediately mobilized, and the majority even of the men above the latter age came to know the front, the trenches, the cruel solitude, the daily sacrifice of life; from the beginning we had in the field an army of over five million

soldiers. And now we have come out of the struggle seriously impoverished through the sacrifice of more than 1,500,000 killed. I believe no other nation can point to such heavy losses: four per cent. of the entire population of our country lies in the cemeteries of the great battle-fields. From more than one family five sons have gone to the front never to return; I know scarcely a single French fireside in the circle of which the war has not left at least one empty place. You realize that for long years our entire history will continue to be dominated materially, morally, and spiritually, by the tragic fact of this great drama. The very aspect of our soil will long bear the imprint of our suffering: one-fifth of our country invaded; from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier the wide and melancholy strip of devastated territory, its houses gaping ruins, its factories razed to the ground, its trees and its flowers ruthlessly mown down. For years to come we shall have always before us, but a few miles distant from our capital, the desolate spectacle of death. It is quite impossible to tell you in these few moments of the noble simplicity of the heroism of France.¹ I know that you are familiar with it; let me say only that for all the people of my generation it will be an inestimable privilege to have communed during the four long years of the war with all that is best in the soul of France and to have felt among all the children of France, consciously or unconsciously, the inextinguishable throbbing of a magnificent ideal.

It is of a special part of this people of France, however, that you expect me to speak—of the students of the universities. During the war all these young students did not separate themselves from the mass of our people, and they do not wish now to be regarded as distinct from them. Stirred from the start by a great impulse of enthusiasm, they threw themselves with the rest into the defence of the nation and lived in complete fellowship with all during the long ordeal of solitude, of suffering, and of obscure death. In the mud of the trenches as well as in the elation of the attack they have been shoulder to shoulder with the most humble, the most ignorant. They have become acquainted with all that is great in the soul of the people, and for most of them certainly the most profound experience has been the forgetting of class distinctions and class pride, the willingness to enter into fellowship with the throng, and the experiencing of a love for that throng. Many remained private soldiers during the entire war; I know of some who even refused to become officers in order to continue in more constant contact with their comrades from among the common people, and I know that the social unrest foreign to so many young people of our middle or intellectual classes before the war is now in countless instances the chief manifestation of their spiritual life. Combatants like the rest, they died like the rest, and one may even say that the proportion of losses among them was greater, many of them having had the costly privilege of being under-officers (lieutenants and second lieutenants) and of being thus the first to offer their lives. I have been

¹See the very suggestive book by Maurice Barrès, *Les Diverses Familles Spirituelles de la France*, Paris, Emile-Paul, 1917.

unable to obtain complete statistics of the losses of the French universities, but I do not believe that I am exaggerating in affirming that more than one-fourth of our students did not return from the war. I can cite only one definite instance, that of "L'Ecole Normale Supérieure of Paris," the highest institution of learning in France, which has given our country the flower of its intellectual leadership. Of the approximately five hundred men who attended this institution between the years 1908 and 1917, 146 have been killed; of the classes of 1914, 1915 and 1916, 161 went to the front, 81 were killed or reported missing, 64 were wounded, and 18 taken prisoners. You will understand by these simple figures something of the heroism of our university students, and you will form a conception of the irreparable losses which these frightful sacrifices have inflicted in the ranks of the leaders of thought in France and even throughout the world.

Among these young students of France I must honor with special mention the members of the French Students' Christian Federation, that veritable élite, who offered themselves with admirable and calm acceptance of the sacrifice, who gave themselves simply for the life of France and also for the Kingdom of God: in their thought and for their will there was no distinction between the country's cause and the cause of Christ. Of the 700 student or schoolboy members enrolled in our associations at the beginning of the war 143 have fallen on the field of honor, and among them the best, those of whom we expected most in the carrying on of the work of God, those who were our leaders, our inspirers, our masters, and who, though dead, yet lead and inspire us more than ever: Charles Grauss, the General Secretary of our Federation and Chairman of our Volunteer Movement; Armand Kuntz, Secretary of our Paris Association; Francis Monod, who was one of the founders of the *Volontaires du Christ* and who had dedicated his life to the spread of the Gospel among Moslem people; and how many others! I should like to be able to speak to you of them as they deserve, to tell you of the appeal which they address to us unceasingly, the responsibilities which rest upon us through their absence. I should like especially to read you some extracts from their letters, from their writings, those lines in which they tell us how they offered up their lives:

"The soul is exalted and enriched in this struggle," writes one of them. Much has been said of sacrifice with reference to our soldiers; I hardly like this idea unless the word is taken absolutely in the old meaning (*sacer*, sacred, and *facere*, to make, to set apart for sacred purposes), but in the modern use of the term there is an idea of loss; now that is not the case: we have everything to gain here, nothing to lose, if our souls are enriched and purified. The beauty of life is worth more than life itself."

I should like to show you for what an ideal they fought and what greatness characterized the hearts which offered themselves for sacrifice. "The new France," said Alfred Casalis, "must rise to make Christ King." "My patriotism is such," wrote Jean Klingebiel, "as to com-

mand respect even from the enemies of my country. If I am proud of my country it is because it is a land of just causes and because its purposes are pure. Blessed be my country which permits me to cry 'Vive la France' without restraint and in the face of all men."

I should like especially to repeat to you their appeal to personal consecration complete and joyous, their appeal to service, formulated admirably in those words so expressive of the Christian spirit of sacrifice uttered by Charles Grauss: "We have made the complete sacrifice, once for all, and for the sake of all."¹

After hearing such messages as these you will understand how one has been able to say: "During the war a golden book has been slowly written, enriched each day with new pages, new testimonies, and it forms a sacred document, an original and stirring chapter in the history of Christianity;" and you will understand, also, that we are heart-broken over the loss of such men.

And now, turning our gaze from the compelling vision of the dead of France, let us look to the present and the future of my country and in particular of our Student Movement. Our chief impressions are those of disorder, of chaos, of anxiety mingled nevertheless with confident hope, and of responsibility. France is issuing from the war exhausted, to all appearances materially ruined, socially distracted, spiritually irresolute. We do not know what the coming years will bring forth. Our young men, in quest of salvation, stand undecided amid the various solutions that are offered them; on the one hand political, social, intellectual, and religious conservatism, represented by the Roman Catholic Church; on the other hand, mystic socialism and "Bolshevism." On the decision to be made by the youth of France depend

¹The following passages bear eloquent testimony to the spirit in which our French students met their death.

(a) On the eve of his death the 11th of April, he wrote in the rain while surrounded by the mud of his trench: "Never have the motives which draw me to God been so strong. I have opened my Bible because of a new and imperious need. It was no longer my daily hour of devotion at a fixed time, but a cry for help. The old Bible of my childhood opened so many times with indifference has caused me to hear again that voice, majestic, august, inaccessible to the approaches of pure reason, and miraculously compassionate, the voice of the eternal will of God, the same for Israel as for us. Nothing happens without His Will. No event takes place by chance for any one among us. There is neither war, danger, nor cruel separation which escapes the hand of the Almighty." (Letter of R. Jalaquier.)

(b) "To-morrow in the early hours," wrote Lieutenant Alex. de Faye, "we are to make a charge from our parapet. You may well imagine what is my state of mind, with what calmness and what gravity I am looking forward to events. 'God is' and that suffices. I do not tire of repeating those two words. Faith and good cheer always. It is necessary for us to accept the position of humble collaborators in the universal work which extends over the ages. But that very realization far from depressing us brings infinite elation to our thought and our heart. By means of this vision we have a share in the Infinite. I am walking the way I have to go with radiant certainty and confidence."

(c) "It is infinitely sweet in moments like this to feel there are about us and behind us other souls which have the same will to the ideal as ourselves and which are pursuing the same march to the star. Others than ourselves if we cannot do it will carry on the great work of the conquest of the world for its King and our King." (Letter of A. Casalis.)

(d) "It is so good to feel near to one another. '*Doux est le peril pour Christ et France.*' Christ and France they go together for us and then also France for Christ and that implies great sacrifices. It is indeed clear that in the present state of the world it is impossible to obtain any result in this realm without complete acceptance of great sacrifices and the first now is that of our lives, which are necessary to the victory. Not that it is absolutely necessary to die in this war, for there must be those who shall return from this war and who shall speak without fear, and there will be such. That will be a splendid work and what will give still more weight to these privileges (for they will be privileged who survive this frightful struggle) will be the absolute determination which they will still possess to make the complete sacrifice of their lives. It will be always the same thing, sacrifice; but from 'sacrifice' flows 'the purest joy.'"

(e) "I am not sent to be killed; I am going to fight, to offer my life for future generations; I shall not die, I shall merely be transferred to another detail. He that goes before us is great enough so that we shall not lose sight of Him." (Letter of M. Groll.)

the very destinies of the nation. And that is why we feel that our responsibilities are heavy and terrible. For we know very well that neither in ultramontanist nor in Bolshevism is to be found the force that is indispensable if our land is to accomplish its mission. The only salvation is in the teaching of Jesus, in the life of the Master of Galilee, in the death of Him crucified on Golgotha. Now in France He is the Great Unknown; too many traditions have hidden His face; too many misconceptions have made Him an object of indifference. To the limit of our strength we want to bear Him, His message of deliverance, to all our comrades in the universities and through them to the entire nation. We know full well that martial glory, the prestige of victory will not suffice to brighten our future. We dream of a France that shall be as admirable in the discipleship of Jesus Christ as it has been in the service of humanity.

Such are our ambitions. True to the example of our elders who have laid down their lives, we wish to offer our lives day by day and as completely as they have done in order that Christ may reign in France and through France in all parts of the world that look to her. For the peace has brought our country new responsibilities: in Africa our colonial empire has been extended considerably, giving us new mission lands to evangelize while we were scarcely sufficient for the discharge of the duties with which we were confronted before the war; in the Near East our influence materially and spiritually has been increased; in Latin America our prestige has been enhanced; even in the Far East the name of France is more extensively known and loved. And in the face of all these tasks we are tempted to say: "Who is sufficient for these things?"

We Christians are enfeebled, reduced numerically and spiritually by our losses, at the very moment when we ought to be more numerous than ever. Considerable difficulties with which you are not familiar in your Anglo-Saxon countries, Protestant in origin and in spirit, confront us on our way. We do not ignore them: we appreciate their full importance. We do not anticipate easy successes; but we wish to be faithful with God's help, and we shall hope 'to the end.'

And now let me close by addressing to you with all the earnestness of which I am capable a request and an appeal. I want to ask you first not to think badly of my country. Many of you have seen it perhaps only in its most external, its least true aspects. You have seen it as immoral or frivolous; you have seen Paris and its boulevards. I am indeed aware of the evil that exists among us, and I am deeply pained as I think of it. I know all our weaknesses; I know the uncertainty of our spiritual future and I assure you that as a Frenchman I often experience the deepest anxiety. But I assure you also that France is great nevertheless, that she is worthy of your affection. When you think of her, think of the France of Verdun and you will have the most truthful picture of her; her tenacity, her idealism, her spirit of sacrifice. I beg you earnestly to pray for France, that she may continue to be a land of great ideals, that she become constantly more devoted to the service

of Jesus Christ, the King—and then, pray for us Christian students, little handful that we are, that we may consecrate our lives more effectively and more completely, and that God may bless our efforts. We need your prayers; we count upon them.

Finally, I wish to add one appeal to the many which you will hear in this spot. I wish to address it to you in the name of France, in the name of her dead as well as of those who live. This appeal is a request for aid in the evangelization of the world, and in presenting it I would affirm the unequalled joy which comes from devoting one's time, money, thought, and life solely to the service of Jesus Christ. Yes, for our work we sometimes need your money. And our losses give us the right, perhaps, to ask it of you.

Above all, however, we have the right and the duty of saying to you: "Go where we cannot go—great is our sacrifice in having to deny ourselves the privilege of carrying on evangelization where we ought. Serve where we cannot serve. Do not allow the gospel of Jesus Christ to remain unknown by a single human soul." A new world is being unfolded; one thing only matters—that God reign in it. He lays claim to you. He demands you for this Kingdom. What will be your answer?

In closing, allow me to give a resumé of all these appeals in the call of one of the dearest of our dead, Charles Grauss, whom I have already named and whose words apply to you as well as to us:

"Do not forget that if humanity experiences moments in which it soars to the heights, it experiences likewise others in which it is drawn to the lower regions. Many men will retain the lesson of the War; still more will forget it; and there will be no lack of false shepherds to lead the human flocks back to their old paths. That will be the moment for you to intervene with all the passion of your youth and all the ardor of our faith. You may be little or great. That is not the question, for the tragic 'to the end' of the combatants of the Great War will be also the intangible watchword of the great crusade of the morrow. The wise will accuse you of imprudence, the timid of folly; but you will leave to the wise their wisdom, to the timid their chimney corner, and you will follow all the paths which lead toward the light of thought and action, follow them 'to the end,' to the extreme limit of your strength.

"If, perchance, weariness overtake you in the course of the struggle, you will think of those who died without experiencing a doubt, knowing that you would continue their work; and their gaze will at every step be fixed upon you, full of confidence and of gratitude. There will be no more tears, no more anxieties, no more fears; all together, in the shadow of our glorious dead, we shall throng with calm and assured tread the foot-paths of the future."